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ABSTRACT

As with commercial stations, the underlying premise of the college radio station is to serve the community, whether it be the campus community or the community at large, but in unique ways often geared to underserved niches of the population. Much of college radio's charm lies in its unpredictable nature and constant mutations. The stations give students opportunities to work in a professional environment, make mistakes, and learn from their experiences. Because most campus radio stations are under the auspices of an academic department within the college or university, the presence of the station can complement actual coursework. From scholarly jazz programs to unusual classical repertory to crashing, howling post-punk hardcore rock, college radio supplies music heard nowhere else on the airwaves. The music industry is turning to college radio to identify bands that may reach mainstream audiences an album or two in the future. The growth of noncommercial educational FM radio, generally the staple of college radio, can be attributed to the Federal Communications Commission's allocation in 1945 of 20 FM channels designated for noncommercial use. Some 70% of all campus radio stations licensed to colleges and universities program some type of "alternative rock." College radio is the breeding ground for new talent and the lifeblood of the independent record industry. Alternative music will continue to maintain, if not expand, its influence on college radio stations. (Contains 32 references. A figure illustrating a sample program guide is attached.) (RS)

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College Radio

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Running head: COLLEGE RADIO

COLLEGE RADIO

"... I think [college radio] is a vital and necessary part of radio today! The college scene make us all examine ourselves as to where we are...what defines the norm if you don't define the edges?" (George Gimarc, Author of Punk Diary: 1970-1979, March 8, 1995).

As a culture, college radio[1] actually reflects the current climate on the campus. As an outlet for the student population, it acts as a venue into the campus itself. The college radio station offers a true alternative to programming not commercially available or viable. The best indicator of this trend is the programming of alternative music that reflects the diverse life styles of a "college culture." Additionally, the "open format" utilized at the majority of college stations also distinguishes them from their commercial counterparts.

The term "college radio" encompasses stations operating on college and university campuses, including 2-year colleges. Initially, college radio stations were developed as experimental stations. Today, college radio broadcasting comes in many forms in addition to the standard FM and AM

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[1]Suzanne P. Wager, a senior majoring in Radio/TV/Film at the University of North Texas, assisted in the initial research for this paper.

radio station. Carrier current/wired-wireless and closed-circuit offer campuses additional outlets. An even more recent offering is the FM cable access station provided to schools through local cable TV systems or on-campus networks (Sauls, 1995). College and university radio stations are operated in an on-going manner. Basically, these stations are run just like a business or "auxiliary enterprise" on campus.

Overall, as with commercial stations, the underlying premise of the college radio station is to serve the community, whether it be the campus community or the community at large, but in unique ways often geared to underserved niches of the population. "... [N]early all stations see their primary function as one of providing alternative programming to their listening audiences. ... More specifically, the alternative programming is primarily made up of three types: entertainment, information, and instruction" (Caton, 1979, p. 9). "College radio is as varied as college towns or college students" (Pareles, 1987, p. 18). Some stations mirror commercial radio, while others opt to develop their own style. Programming at college stations "can span many music genres, from rock to folk, jazz to metal, reggae to rap, gospel to tejano, and classical to country. Spoken word poetry, alternative-perspective news, religious and political programming also

often find a home on college radio" (Sauls, 1995). This programming lends college radio to the appeal of the "open radio format." Basically, anything goes. Even the radio drama, the foundation of early radio, can be found today on college radio stations (Appleford, 1991). Additionally, "numerous college radio stations are network affiliates of National Public Radio, offering well known programming such as 'Morning Edition' and 'All Things Considered' " (Sauls, 1995). (Of note, in 1995, the federal funding of the Corporation of Public Broadcasting was under congressional scrutiny. Both public radio (NPR) and television (PBS) rely on CPB funds (Petrozzello, 1995).) Often college stations, modeling themselves after NPR and community-supported stations, will provide "block programming" along with "innovative, genre-crossing, free-form excursions" (Pareles, 1987, p. 18). This is where you will find Gloria Steinem on "City Arts of San Francisco" hosted by Maya Angelou or Shire Hite on "To The Best of Our Knowledge." (See Figure 1 for a sample block program schedule.)

Thus, as Gundersen wrote in 1989, "much of college radio's charm lies in its unpredictable nature and constant mutations. One fourth of programmers graduate every year. ... No [musical] genre is deemed inappropriate..." (p. 5D). Or as Ken Freedman, program director of WFMU, the Upsala College radio station in East

Orange, N.J., said in 1987: " 'but at best, college radio allows each station to develop its own personality,'... [a]s for us, we're dedicated to diversity -- we're specializing in not specializing' " (Pareles, p. 18).

Student Training and Administration

"College radio is truly the training ground for tomorrow's broadcasters, providing the student an opportunity to practice techniques in broadcasting" (Sauls, 1995). "The traditional function of most campus radio stations has been to serve as a training ground for students who plan to enter professional broadcasting" (Smith, 1990, p. 17). The stations give students opportunities to work in a professional environment, make mistakes, and learn from their experiences. These stations are staffed by volunteer "non-professional" students, and/or skeleton part or full-time paid staff member(s). Basically, these are full-time entities operated by part-timers and volunteers. Here it must recognized that "because of their limited life experience, students may not always know the difference between promotion, public relations, and pressure (Holtermann, 1992)" from outside entities, particularly record promoters (Wilkinson, 1994). Here, then, station administration is critical.

Because most campus radio stations are under the auspices of an academic department within the college or university, the presence of the station can compliment actual coursework. The stations are generally supervised by a faculty advisor or staff manager who oversees the administration and operation of the station on a day-to-day basis, providing needed continuity as student staffs change year to year (Sauls, 1995). Thompsen wrote in 1992 that "a faculty advisor can be a driving force in shaping a vision for the station, the reasons for its existence" (p. 14). Such demands of station administration and supervision of a faculty advisor are normally in addition to their normal workload requirements of teaching, research, and service. Because of the relationship between the station advisor and academic department it must be recognized that "financial resources and operating procedures are almost entirely determined by the academic missions of the department" (Ozier, 1978, p. 34). The findings of studies reflect the important association between academic programs and the funding and purposes of college radio (see Sauls, 1993).

Funding for stations varies greatly, with the bulk traditionally coming from student fee support or general academic funds. This, of course, can cause conflict. "Although some college stations have switched to a top 40 format and emulate professional stations, most are still

eclectic, non-commercial, and proud of it. But to stay afloat, and to grow, they must please their sponsoring campus groups" (Knopper, 1994, p. 84). Otherwise, they might be subject to possible budget cuts or even suspension. But, as Stephen Fisher, new music program coordinator at the University of San Francisco's KUSF, says:

> ...Providing "cultural programming," winning awards, avoiding radio violations, and operating with a sense of "what they don't know won't hurt them" staves off the budget cutters.
>
> Basically, they leave us alone, Fisher says. More because they don't understand us, not because they want to leave us alone. (Knopper, 1994, p. 84)

Because the funding of these station is usually limited, many stations also solicit program underwriting support, listener contributions, and outright donations, which are important because advertiser/commercial content is severely restricted by law on noncommercial stations (Sauls, 1995).

Programming, Censorship, and Alternative Radio

"From scholarly jazz programs to unusual classical repertory to crashing, howling post-punk hardcore rock, college radio (alongside a few listener-supported and community radio stations) supplies music heard nowhere else on the airwaves" (Pareles, 1987, p. 18). This type of

programming, an actual service, is consistent with the fact that colleges and universities, as are commercial broadcasters, are licensed to "operate broadcast facilities in the public interest, convenience, and necessity" (Ozier, 1978, p. 34). Additionally, the on-going broadcasts provided by college radio help to serve as public relations arms for the schools themselves. Often college radio stations are the only outlets for such broadcasts as campus sports and news. In regard to the colleges' and universities' perceptions of college radio, one advantage is that the institutional image is enhanced every time a well-programmed station identifies itself as affiliated with the school (Sauls, 1995). This identification though can lead to potential problems, particularly in regards to music programming and censorship. Wolper, in 1990, clearly indicated this issue when he wrote that "[t]he licenses of campus radio stations are held by boards of trustees at universities and colleges. Those groups traditionally avoid arguments with the FCC" [Federal Communications Commission] (p. 54). Wolper cited the concern of Ken Fate, the student general manager of KUOI-FM, at the University of Idaho, in Moscow in regards to the FCC: "They are trying to censor us. ... They are making it criminal to play music. To read poetry on the air. To read literature" (p. 54).

> As the influence of college radio grows, however, so does its caution. [In 1987], the Federal Communications Commission issued a warning to KCSB-FM, a 10-watt college radio station in Santa Barbara, Calif., that it had committed "actionable indecency" by broadcasting the punk-rock song "Makin' Bacon" after 10 P.M. The warning was part of a broadening of the commission's restrictions on broadcast indecency. (Pareles, 1987, p. 18)

How then does this compare then to commercial radio broadcasting? College radio "is pretty much unregulated as to what's played. You have people in charge, making decisions as to what to play, that are not operating under commercial constraints of consideration of how popular is this group?" (G. Gimarc, personal communication, March 8, 1995). This view was also emphasized when, in 1989, Scott Byron, editor of the College Music Journal's New Music Report, said that "they don't have commercial pressures. Listeners don't realize that what they hear on commercial radio has been filtered by programmers so it reaches the lowest common denominator. Yet most people are willing to take chances, to explore" (Gundersen p. 5D). This exploration can be found on college radio. John E. Murphy, a member of the Intercollegiate Broadcasting System Board of Directors and then general manager of WHUS-FM at the

University of Connecticut at Storrs was quoted in 1990 as saying that "[l]arge commercial stations often don't want to give air over to extremes. They would never touch some of the stuff that is broadcast on campus stations" (Wolper, p. 54). And this then, leads to the idea of programming "alternative" material, mainly alternative music. And, as expected, that has impacted commercial radio listening habits as we know them. "The shift would be the latest indicator that American's thirst for music traditionally played on college radio is growing. ... [A]n increase in fragmentation and focus on individual demographics has left traditional Top 40 high and dry" (Zimmerman, 1992, p. 64).

And, college radio has made an impact and the music industry has discovered college radio! In 1992, Schoemer wrote:

> The music industry at large has looked for ways to exploit college radio as market at least since the mid-80's, when bands like R.E.M. and U2 crossed over from a base of college-radio fans to mainstream commercial success. But this year [1992], with the multi-platinum sales of albums by Nirvana (more than 4 million copies), Pearl Jam (over 3 million copies), Red Hot Chili Peppers (3 million) and others, the game has changed considerably. College radio has been a

> business for several years; now, it's serious business. (p. C27)

The music industry is turning to "college radio as a kind of early warning system, identifying bands that may reach mainstream audiences an album or two in the future" (Pareles, 1987, p. 18).

The programming of alternative music can have a negative impact as well. This concept of college radio as an alternative to commercial radio, is fairly widespread, but as Thompsen indicated in 1992:

> ...it can detract from the educational experience of students by encouraging them to focus on the sources of programming, rather than on the audiences for programming. ... The philosophy is, by design, diametrically opposed to the prevalent philosophy of nearly every commercial radio (and television) station. (p. 13)

In reality, the entire concept of providing "alternative music" to a college audience can be questioned as to the penetration of the college demographic itself. Kevin Zimmerman, wrote in 1989 that "more high schoolers actually listen to alternative music than college students" (p. 67.) And so, it is postulated that while alternative rock bands are popular on college radio stations, the college students themselves listen more to mainstream radio.

Alternative Music and College Radio

The growth of noncommercial educational FM radio, generally the staple of college radio, can be attributed to the Federal Communications Commission's allocation in 1945 of 20 FM channels designated for noncommercial use (between 88 and 92 megaHertz). Little was it anticipated that the noncommercial "band" would evolve into what it is today. "In the later 70's and early 80's, bands like R.E.M., U2 and Talking Heads first established themselves on the underground circuit before eventually reaching an audience of millions" (Schoemer, 1992, p. 26).

> Back in the '70s it would probably had been rebellious playing a Black Sabbath record or maybe the Sex Pistols. These days it's going to be something like the Butthole Surfers. The line keeps getting moved further and further to the left. Certainly to someone not really involved in it, it could seem like "it's much more out there now than it was." But, in a historical context and in taking things as they relate to each other, it's just as outrageous to play a Black Sabbath record in 1970 as it is to play the Sex Pistols in 1976 as it is to play the Butthole Surfers today. It still achieves the same effect. (G. Gimarc, personal communication, March 8, 1995)

When did the alternative music "thing" really take off? In 1994, Cheryl Botchick, an associate editor at the College Music Journal New Music Report said that "[t]en years ago, college radio existed in kind of a bubble. ... Then came Jane's Addiction, Nirvana, Lollapalooza, Pearl Jam, and the lucrative marketing of alternative music" (Knopper, 1994, p. 84). Some record companies have gone so far to suggest "that college stations are 'wasting their signal' if they aren't playing alternative music" (Stark, 1993, p. 90).

Why has "alternative music" become so popular? It is projected that some 70% of all campus radio stations licensed to colleges and universities program some type of "alternative rock" (Wilkinson, 1994). Radio consultant and Pollack Media Group CEO Jeff Pollack said that "[p]eople are taking a rawer, tougher, more substantive approach to things in general, and there's a rejection of what's predictable and too slick" (Zimmerman, 1992, p. 66). This feeling has also thus produced talent like Soundgarden, Stone Temple Pilots, Tracy Chapman, Edie Brickell and the New Bohemians, Living Colour, Ziggy Marley, Dire Straits, the Police, the Cars, the Clash, Elvis Costello, 10,000 Maniacs, and Nine Inch Nails. These have become the "mainstream" groups, the groups now aware of in the general public.

But alternative music is not just limited to rock music. In 1989, Gil Creel, Music Director of Tulane

University's WTUL, New Orleans, told the audience at the College Music Journal's New Music Report's Music Marathon "that concentrating on 'the latest kick-ass hardcore or feedback [rock]' wasn't enough to be alternative, but that jazz, house music, hip-hop, and blues must also be represented" (Bessman & Stark, p. 12). Even "college-appropriate country music" should be exposed (Bessman, 1989, p. 52).

"College radio is a safety valve in the sanity of the music world" (G. Gimarc, personal communication, March 8, 1995). This is where new talent is born and discovered. "Today, college radio is all-important. It's the breeding ground for the new talent ... [and] it's also the lifeblood of the independent record industry" (Ward, 1988, p. 47). By the mid-80's, it was discovered that college radio could break new groups in such genres as country/punk fusion, the 60s sound, and punk rock. "College radio stations -- greenhouses for cutting-edge rock 'n' roll -- nurture new bands that often become mainstream hits a few months later" (Stearns, 1986, p. D4). Thus, "[a]t a time when many new artists face difficulty breaking through at commercial radio, college radio has grown into a virtual industry within an industry[]" (Starr, 1991, p. 30). Major music industry trade magazines, such as Gavin, now cover college radio playlists, along with the mainstream music. "The

major record companies view format-free college stations that play alternative music as rock's minor league, the training ground for future U2s and Depech Modes" (Mundy, 1993, p. 70). Additionally, the college students playing the music tend to appreciate it more than mainstream djs. "Says singer Tanya Donelly, who's often interviewed by campus deejays. 'They're more educated and excited about the music.' " (Mundy, 1993, p. 70). This leads to the social implication of discovering new talent! "College radio is garnering new respect and clout as a launching pad for undiscovered, and under-appreciated, talent" (Gundersen, 1989, p. 5D). New talent, alternative music, and college radio are being desired more and more (Mayhew, 1994).

It's Not Mainstream...It's Alternative...It's Expression

> If the 'Saturday Night Live' appearance [printed January 1992] was Nirvana's chance to prove to the unconverted that it was worthy of such honors [of being one of the most popular bands], the group failed miserably. But if its goal was to make an uncompromising display of the values of underground music, the achievement was unheralded. Nirvana didn't cater to the mainstream; it played the game on its own terms. (Schoemer, 1992, p. 26)

For those of us who saw the Nirvana television performance it was a message of expression. Here, the ultimate alternative, college-oriented group was captivating and cultivating the American culture with its performance. For them it was their time to express their true feelings. "Nirvana may not fit into the formulaic pigeonholes the industry usually carves for popular music. But for a whole generation of misfits, the members of Nirvana are nothing short of saviors" (Schoemer, 1992, p. 26). Coupled with Nirvana's appearance on MTV's "Unplugged," theses performances were the true definition of the young culture and their feelings toward society. "Generation X" has realized that they might not be as successful as their parents. This phenomenon, if it becomes reality, will be a societal first in America. We have always strived for, been preached about, been told how we will always do better than our parents. But, it has now become a possibility that this is not certain. And, the college generation, the younger generation, has realized this possibility. To other generations they appear to wander about. They appear mis-guided. In a way, it is almost an organized form of being hectic. You really don't know what's next, but you can sense the anger. And this form, then, is reflected in their music. And, in turn, it is reflected in the programming of college radio.

What's the future of alternative radio? As of September 1994, The M Street Journal reported that out of 11,565 operating stations, 370 were programming alternative rock as their primary format. Of these stations, 276 were noncommercial. Listed as the tenth most popular format out of 29, it is apparent that alternative rock is growing as a fundamental format (back cover). Thus, it can be projected that alternative music will continue to maintain, if not expand, its influence on college radio sations.

> You get a lot more confrontational radio in college radio. And, it's actually very healthy from two different standpoints. One is it gives an accurate reflection of that part of society which doesn't really get much exposure in the normal media. And the other part is, as broadcasters, these kids get to work it out of their systems for 4 years before they have to put on the suit and tie and be real people...real responsible broadcasters. (G. Gimarc, personal communication, March 8, 1995)

And so it rests upon those who direct these "students" to understand their limitations, be positive, create a professional atmosphere, and give responsibility in order to further nurture the creative activity. Only through this, the programming available, will one really envision the culture that is college radio.

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Figure 1

* Jazz South airs the first Friday of every month.

SOURCE: KNTU-FM Program Guide, Feb.-April, 1995, University of North Texas, Denton.